“The manuscript has been written three times, and each rewriting has discovered errors. Many must still remain; the improvement of the part is sacrificed to the completion of the whole. The correction of errors will be welcomed.”

Will Durant, The History of Civilization, Volume IV, The Age of Faith
# Lab Report

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This is a Reference

It is not intended to be read from beginning to end. Information has been organized to provide succinct examples of writing engineering documents. Turn to the section you need help with and look at the examples.
Lab Reports

I. Before you Begin
The severity of any task is lessened when you take a moment to understand the purpose of your work. Before you begin writing, establish the issues you are going to address, who you are going to address them to, and why you need to do it at all.

A A Lab Report is

| Summary | A Lab Report is a detailed account of an experiment, its methods, results, and conclusions which answer a question. |

B Define your Discovery Question
Writing down one or two primary “big picture” questions your report addresses become the focal point as you write your report.

**Discovery Question:** What size electric heating element is installed in a given water heater?

C Audience & Purpose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engineers (Peers)</td>
<td>To Inform</td>
<td>Engineers interested in similar work will base their experiment on yours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors</td>
<td>To Persuade</td>
<td>Supervisors want to know about the work you have done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA</td>
<td></td>
<td>The grader is also your audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineers interested in similar work will base their experiment on yours.</td>
<td>People want to know what you have done.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors want to know about the work you have done.</td>
<td>Raw data does not support itself; you must convince your audience it is correct.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D Why Write Well?
Recent surveys of Mechanical Engineering Faculty have shown that students need to be able to present their experimental results in an understandable way.

“Students do not understand how to sell their work/results. They have difficulty understanding what needs to be explained to the audience and what does not. They assume the audience knows what they know.”

– ME Faculty, 2007 WEC Survey
E Lab Report Elements
A report is created using these characteristics.

Self-Supporting Document
This document can stand on its own. You are presenting enough information for the reader to understand the basis of your arguments. Other documents may be referenced for further investigation by the reader, such as a lab manual or journal article.

Name, Title, Page Number, & Date
This document requires Name, Title, Page Number, and Dates. These are essential elements of formatting. Place your name or title with the page number in the header.

Standard Formatting
This document follows standard academic formatting guidelines. These include 12pt Font, 1” margins, and headings which subdivide the information into manageable sections, with one heading per page minimum. Your instructor may have more stringent requirements.

Graphic Numbering
This document uses visuals. Each graphic, such as: figures, tables, pictures, equations, etc, is labeled and numbered sequentially. Word will manage this task for you—search Help for Captions and Cross-references.

IMRD Format
This document follows the IMRD traditional report writing standard. It contains the following sections in this order: Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion. Introduction provides background and the question addressed, methods describes how that question was answered, results show the resulting data from the experiment and discussion is the author’s interpretation of those results. Often results and discussion are combined.

Active Voice
This document encourages active voice. In active voice, the subject of a sentence is doing the action, such as, “I performed the experiment.” This is different from the passive voice where the subject is receiving the action, such as, “the experiment was performed.” Active voice adds clarity. It is becoming widely used, but you should still check with your instructor for their preference.

Persuasive
This document is trying to make the audience believe something.
**F  Tense**

Technical writing varies its tense depending on what you are discussing. Tense should be consistent for each section you write.

**Past Tense**

This document uses past tense. As a rule of thumb, past tense is used to describe work you did over the course of the report timeline.

**Present Tense**

This report uses present tense. As a rule of thumb, present tense is used to describe knowledge and facts that were known before you started.

Be consistent. Write a section in a consistent tense.

**G  Why This Format?**

In its early days, technical communication—the ability to communicate logic from one individual to another as efficiently as possible was not well developed.

Over the course of several hundred years, the standard IMRD format of the scientific paper was adopted as a standard. By the 1970s, nearly all academic journals required this standard for scientific experimental reporting. The basic outline is shown below.

The report revolves around the solving of a specific question, described in the introduction and answered in the discussion.
## II  How to Write a Lab Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Report Sections</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.1  Title Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.2  Abstract</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.3  Table of Contents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.4  Introduction</td>
<td>In this section, you describe <strong>what</strong> you are trying to find and <strong>why</strong>. Background and motivation are used to provide the reader with a reason to read the report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Background / Theory</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Purpose</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Governing Equations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Discovery Question (DQ)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.5  Methods</td>
<td>In this section, you explain <strong>how</strong> question addressed is answered. Clearly explain your work so it could be repeated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Experiment Overview</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Apparatus</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Equipment Table</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Procedures</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.6  Results</td>
<td>In this section, you present the <strong>results</strong> of your experiment. Tables, graphs, and equations are used to summarize the results. Link equations and visuals together with narrative, like a story. Remember your audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Narrate (like a story)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Tables and Graphs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Equations in Variable Form</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Uncertainties</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Units!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Indicate Final Results</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.7  Discussion</td>
<td>In this section, you <strong>explain</strong> and <strong>interpret</strong> your results. Insert your opinion, backed by results. Discuss issues you had and how this could be corrected in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The conclusion is a summary of your results and discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Answer DQ</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Theoretical Comparison</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Explanation of Anomalies / Error</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Conclusion / Summary</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>•  Future Work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.8  References</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.9  Appendices – Raw Data, Sample Calcs, Lab Notebook, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Show Me!
The following sections show example lab report sections which have been annotated. In each section, BLUE indicates the required components of each section and YELLOW are suggestions to successfully write those parts.

### A.1 Title Page
The title page contains a descriptive title of the document, the author’s name, affiliation, and date. List any people who performed the work with you. This title page must conform to established standards of your class. Ask your instructor for his or her preference.

### A.2 Abstract
The abstract’s purpose is to summarize the information contained in the report for someone who doesn’t have the time or resources to read it. It’s inclusion as a report “section” is slightly misleading. In many ways, the abstract is a document all on its own; it includes all the same parts of your report and its major findings.

Quantitative results and their uncertainties should be included when possible. It must contain parts from each major section of your report. Many times this is the only thing anyone will read about your report. It should be no more than 400 words. This is not a “teaser.”

You might be tempted to write this first, as it appears first chronologically in the report; however, because the abstract is a summary of the entire report, you should write it last. This is when you will be most familiar with the report and its major findings.

### A.3 Table of Contents
The table of contents’ purpose is to allow the reader to easily find information. It also informs the reader about the report’s organization. List page numbers with descriptive titles for the sections. This should be its own page. See this guide’s TOC for an example.
A.4 Introduction
This explains what and why you are doing the experiment. It should show necessity for the experiment through theory and past work.

**Introduction**
A fundamental concept in mechanical engineering is the first law of thermodynamics, which states that internal energy is conserved in a control volume. This law has many applications in engineering, such as: heat exchangers, pumps, turbines, HVAC mixing and refrigeration cycles. It is used to understand the states of fluids as they enter or leave a control volume. The general form of the first law is Equation 1.

\[
\frac{dE}{dt} = Q - W + \sum_{in} m_{in} \left( h_{in} + \frac{V_{in}^2}{2} + g z_{in} \right) - \sum_{out} m_{out} \left( h_{out} + \frac{V_{out}^2}{2} + g z_{out} \right)
\]

Equation 1: First Law

This energy balance states that heat transfer into a system (\( Q \)) less the work out of a system (\( W \)) plus the mass flow out (\( m_{out} \)) times its internal energy less the mass flow in (\( m_{in} \)) times its internal energy is equal to the energy storage term (\( \frac{dE}{dt} \)).

In this experiment, the first law of thermodynamics will be used with an electric water heater to answer the research question, “What size electric element is used in a given water electric heater?” We hypothesize it will be close to 1 kW, which is the approximate average of most other water heaters of similar size and shape.

Explicitly stating the report question in the text of the introduction will help you keep the report in focus. As you continue writing, keep this question in mind—this is why you are making this report.

At this point, also notice that you haven’t said anything about your experiment.

A.5 Methods
This section explains how the report question above was answered. After reading this section, the reader should be able to completely reproduce the experiment to verify the results.

**Method**
Tap water was passed through the electric water heater at flow rates ranging from 50 ml/min to 300 ml/min. The input and output temperatures were recorded. The information was then used with the first law to approximate the work by the heating element performed on the system.
Notice the figure narration scheme so far. The report is a story of visuals linked together with text.

A.6 Results
This section of the report show what you found. Your data is manipulated to be presented nicely and explained.
So far, you have only presented your data. You haven’t described what it means. That comes in the next section.
A.7 Discussion

In this section, the results are interpreted. Describe the why you think the data turned out like it did. Insert your scientific opinion in this section.

**Discussion**

The experimental results obtained above were used to calculate the work done on the system by the electric heater. To calculate this, the energy balance equation, Equation 1, is used.

\[
\frac{dE}{dt} = Q - \dot{W} + \sum_{i=1}^{n} m_i \left( h_{in} + \frac{V_i^2}{2} + gz_{in} \right) - \sum_{i=1}^{n} m_i \left( h_{out} + \frac{V_i^2}{2} + gz_{out} \right)
\]

**Equation 4**

When we assume that the system is at steady state, there is no heat loss, and that velocity and potential changes are negligible, the equation reduces to Equation 5.

\[
\dot{W} = \dot{m}(h_{in} - h_{out})
\]

**Equation 5**

The equation can be further simplified by making the assumption that there will be relatively small changes in pressure and temperature over the system, so enthalpy can approximated using Equation 6.

\[
h_{in} - h_{out} = c_{p,avg} (T_{in} - T_{out})
\]

**Equation 6**

In this case, an average temperature of 60°F will be used to get the average specific heat of water, \( c_{p,avg} = 0.999 \frac{Btu}{lbm \cdot °F} \). By substituting massflow for density \( \rho \) times volumetric flowrate \( \dot{V} \) we get our principal analytical equation, Equation 7.

\[
\dot{W} = \rho \cdot \dot{V} \cdot c_{p,avg} \cdot (T_{in} - T_{out})
\]

**Equation 7**

For this experiment, the density of water is assumed to be 62.4 lbm/ft³ with no uncertainty. The input water temp, \( T_{in} \), was found to be 46.1 ± 0.4 °F. To solve for the work put into the system, we perform a linear regression of temperature increase versus the inverse of volumetric flowrate. When this is performed, the slope \( m \) is an average of all data points and can directly calculate the work.

\[
m = \frac{\dot{W}}{\rho \cdot c_{p,avg}}
\]

**Equation 8**

Equation 8 can be manipulated to solve for the work. The regression analysis and confidence intervals are shown in Figure 3.
The confidence intervals were plotted using Equation 2, replacing the standard deviation of the sample with the standard error of the regression analysis. Uncertainty in the slope of the regression line was calculated with the same equation, but using the standard error of the slope from the regression analysis. Figure 3 shows a loosely fitting line, with $R^2=0.787$ indicating the presence of other factors we have not considered.

The last data point, at 1/V of 0.002 min/mL deviated considerably from the linear model and might be considered an outlier upon further analysis.

The resulting slope and uncertainty of the regression line is $m = 23900 \pm 2500 \frac{\Delta T \cdot mL}{\text{min}}$.

While the work can be solved for by simply substituting the slope into Equation 8, the uncertainty in the work needs to be propagated.

$$\Delta W = \Delta T \cdot m \cdot \sqrt{\left(\frac{\Delta m}{m}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{\Delta \rho}{\rho}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{\Delta c_{p,avg}}{c_{p,avg}}\right)^2}$$

Equation 9

It is assumed that the density of the fluid and specific heat are without error, so Equation 9 reduces to an equality of the percent errors of both the slope and work. To account for the bias errors from measurements, those errors are propagated in Equation 10, which is the propagation of Equation 7, combined with Equation 9 using RSS.

$$\Delta W = \Delta T \cdot m \cdot \sqrt{\left(\frac{\Delta m}{m}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{\Delta V}{V}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{\Delta T}{T}\right)^2}$$

Equation 10

The uncertainty in volumetric flowrate and temperature measurements are found in the equipment table. After substituting values, we solved for the total work done on the system.

$$W = 920 \pm 130 \text{ W}$$

This value seems reasonable and near our predicted value.

The report is now fully described.
A.7½ Conclusion / Summary
This section is a summary of the results and discussion from the report. It is still discussion, where you insert your opinion of the results. Report the key findings of the report here. It is much like the results and discussion sections of the abstract. Directly answer the report question here. Do not be vague.

**Conclusion**
The first law of thermodynamics was used to calculate the work put into the system through the electric element, which was 920 ± 130 W. The model used in this experiment was simplistic and could account for the large uncertainty in this measurement. Figure 3 showed a large uncertainty in data when performing a linear fit, with a low R² value and some questionable data points. A shortcoming of this model might be the assumption of an adiabatic system. The heater was constructed only of plastic and became warm during experimentation. This would indicate heat being lost to the environment, which was excluded. Inclusion of such a term would increase the work being performed by the electric heater into the system.

Further experimentation could be done to measure the heat loss by the system. An ammeter could be connected to the electric heating element to measure the work going in, and a similar method, like used here, could solve for the heat loss to the surroundings.

A.8 References
The reference section shows where you got information that was not your own.

**References**


There are many citation styles you can use such as: ASME, CMS, APA, etc. Consult a citation manual for assistance. “A Pocket Style Manual” by Diana Hacker is a good start.

Try RefWorks at the U of M library website. It will manage all your citations automatically.

A.9 Appendices
The appendix should contain information that is required, but would be distracting from the normal flow of the report. This might be raw data, lab notebook pages, regression summaries, or sample calculations.

“He doesn’t expect the reader to read the appendices.”
- Dr. Terry Simon, Mechanical Engineering Faculty
B Process Tips

- Be Concise.
- It is more important you are clear and direct than to follow formatting rules.
- The report organization doesn’t follow the way you need to think about it to write it. To help, write a report in the following order: Methods, Results, Discussion, Intro, and Abstract.
- Use visuals. Engineering is more than prose writing.
- Be concise. Extra words actually detract from meaning.
- Think of a report as a big string of visuals, linked together by narrative sentences.
- Graphs, Figures, Tables, and Equations are all worthy of their own line.
- Avoid showing actual calculations in the body of the report—they are difficult to understand. Keep everything in variable format, and show numerical calculations in the appendix.
- Some instructors require more rigorously formatted reports; Check with them if you have any questions.

C Assessment Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lab Report Writing Checklist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Cover Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Abstract gives a quick, complete summary of the experiment and its conclusions. Less than 400 words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Table of Contents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Introduction provides background and theory for the experiment; shows what the experiment will find and why it is needed. States DQ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Method gives a complete description of the apparatus, equipment, and procedure which was followed in the experiment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Results describe the data obtained when the method was performed; shows uncertainties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Discussion is your interpretation of the results and describes them like a story. Answers DQ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ References</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Appendix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Big Question

Do you provide a clear & concise representation of your work?